

Trip to South Africa and Botswana: BIG 5 – Horseback Safari

A journey to see the 'Big Five' and into another world – on

horseback through South Africa and Botswana

Africa is huge! We're flying from Amsterdam to Johannesburg. I'm watching the little aeroplane on the screen in front of me. It doesn't seem to be making much headway at all, even after hours, and I'm beginning to grasp the sheer scale of Africa. This is the first time I've travelled to southern Africa.

My non-riding companion, Mirko, is sitting next to me. To pass the time, we're playing Tetris against each other. Our destination is South Africa. There, we'll be spending a few days at Dinaka Lodge. It's situated about a three-hour drive north-east of Johannesburg, within a 10,000-hectare wildlife reserve in the Waterberg region. After that, we'll head on to Botswana for another five days at 'Two Mashatu Camp'. It all seems rather abstract to me so far, and I'm really looking forward to seeing what awaits me there. I'll be going on a horse-back safari myself; Mirko, on the other hand, prefers the safer option – a jeep safari. Partly because he's missed out on learning to ride so far.

We land in Johannesburg late in the evening. We're quite tired, but also excited. We're spending one more night in Johannesburg. A small guesthouse very close to the airport had been recommended to us. So, as we head for the exit, we keep an eye out for a sign with our names on it. Loads of signs are held out towards us. But our names aren't on any of them! At first, I'm a bit taken aback. Then I realise it's still before the agreed time. So we relax and step out of the airport. It's so warm! It's almost midnight and it must still be around 20 degrees. It was still winter in Germany. We're on holiday!

Back at the meeting point, I finally spot 'our' sign. Willem Bester, a friendly, elderly gentleman with an English air about him, picks us up and takes us to his little paradise. The guesthouse really is a little oasis, just 10 minutes away from the hustle and bustle of the airport. A pretty building is tucked away in an equally pretty garden. There are palm trees too! And a swimming pool. After Willem has shown us to our room, we seriously consider whether we should go for a swim or at least take a quick dip. But then we realise it's already quite late. So we just stand in the courtyard for a while and gaze at the starry sky. The Southern Cross must be visible somewhere...

We sleep like angels that night. And in the morning, a delicious English breakfast awaits us, with eggs and sausages and all the trimmings. It's all served in a room straight out of the colonial era. The wallpaper with its huge flowers almost overwhelms us. But we're thrilled. Everything is so different!

Willem takes us back to the airport. If we have any problems during our stay, we're told to ring him at any time. That's reassuring.

At the 'Information Desk' we meet our fellow travellers. Bernd, a management consultant from Düsseldorf; Caro from Bottrop, now living in Bavaria; Norbert from Munich, who works at the Bundesbank and is a true-blue, die-hard Bavarian; an elderly French couple – he's already 75 and used to be a fashion designer; she looks rather sour.

Once everyone has finally gathered, we're ready to set off. On the drive to Dinaka Lodge, we pass South Africa's capital, Pretoria. On the hills, you can see large villas, each surrounded by a high wall topped with barbed wire. Just a short distance further on, corrugated iron shacks stand side by side. These must be the famous townships, built by white people for black people during apartheid. Back then, black people were not allowed to live in the cities. Today, of course, these absurd laws no longer apply. However, most black people today cannot afford to move, and so segregation based on skin colour largely remains.

The further we travel from Johannesburg and the capital, the narrower and more adventurous the roads become. At some point, we find ourselves bumping along gravel tracks. But that's just fine! It's exactly how we imagine Africa to be. Finally, we arrive at the entrance to Dinaka Lodge. And before long, we spot the first giraffes! A young giraffe is standing in the road and, at first, shows no sign of moving out of the way. The animals are so majestic. It seems as though nothing can rattle them.

Then we finally see the lodge. As we step out onto the terrace of our thatched suite, we're left speechless. We hadn't expected this. Below us lies a lake, completely covered in water lilies. Behind it stretches a plain of grass and scrubland. At first glance, there isn't much going on. Luckily, we've brought our binoculars. So, for the next few minutes, we lean against the railing and scan our surroundings. There! Mirko has spotted a couple of ostriches. Antelopes are grazing here and there. At this stage, we have no idea how many different species of antelope there are here. We get to know the first species over lunch – in the form of impala lasagne. Unusual, but delicious.

Dinaka Lodge is perched on a hill overlooking the lake, with the mountains in the background

In the afternoon, we drive to the stables, which are situated a little further up the hill, at the foot of the mountains. Kirsten, our South African guide, points out the white patches high up on the cliffs. That's where a vulture colony is located. Thirty-five horses are waiting for us at the stables.

In other words, there isn't really a stable. It would be unnecessary in this climate anyway. The horses are kept in a large paddock. There are various breeds, but mainly native Boer horses. They are hardy and resistant to the many diseases that horses from other regions would not be able to cope with. For the next two days, I'll be riding 'Rag-time', a dark chestnut.

On our first ride, we get to know the horses and the immediate surroundings of the lodge. After a few minutes, we come across a small herd of giraffes; later, wildebeest cross our path, along with various antelopes – impala, kudu and the huge eland. A warthog disappears into the bush with its tail held high. We gallop back to the stables. That was a brilliant first excursion on horseback into the African wilderness.

Our group of riders

In the evening, we have kudu bolognese. We sit together at the large round table and tell each other stories about past trips – with and without horses. A few days later, Norbert remarks that it's actually rather odd – on holiday, you talk about past holidays, and on your next holiday you'll be talking about this one. I suppose that's just how it is.

Later, in bed, we realise that it's strangely quiet here. Wonderfully quiet. There's no noise whatsoever apart from the chirping of crickets. There's no landline, mobile, radio or television, and certainly no internet. What's more, it's incredibly dark. You can't see your hand in front of your face. Nothing. So we end up sleeping like logs.

Early the next morning, we're back on 'our' terrace, enjoying the view of the lake. At sunrise, everything looks completely different – and even more beautiful. After breakfast, we're back in the saddle. Over the next four days, we ride all over the grounds of Dinaka Lodge in every direction. Most mornings, we spend a couple of hours on horseback, then return to the lodge for lunch, have a siesta and go out riding again in the evening. One day, we're even treated to a bush brunch. As the name suggests: a brunch right in the middle of the bush.

We come across animals that you would otherwise only see at the zoo. Antelopes, wildebeest, zebras, giraffes, rhinos, warthogs, monkeys and dung beetles keep crossing our path.

On the first day, we ride across a vast grassy plain where an incredible number of animals graze peacefully side by side. From a distance, we spot a mother rhino with her calf. She prefers to keep her distance, though. We only catch a glimpse of the zebras and antelopes from afar that day as well. The terrain around Dinaka Lodge is criss-crossed by numerous sandy tracks and narrow paths. Sometimes we simply ride straight through the bush. But it's the wider sandy tracks in particular that are perfect for a brisk gallop. At one point, a dung beetle overtakes me at a gallop. Suddenly there's a loud buzzing sound right next to me, and before I know it, the fat black beetle has flown past. At one point, we also spot a dung beetle hard at work. It's busily pushing its ball of dung along in front of it. Until Caro's horse steps on it.

Sometimes we don't see any animals for quite a while. After all, this isn't a zoo; the animals are wild and naturally like to hide. So we simply enjoy the beautiful countryside or listen to Kirsten, who seems to know everything about the tracks, plants, sounds and smells of this region.

Sometimes, though, we get very close to the animals. On Dinaka, I'm particularly impressed by our encounters with the rhinos. On the second day, we come across two small groups of these huge pachyderms straight away. At first, we see the animals from a distance. They hear us coming and prick up their ears. They can't see us, as rhinos have very poor eyesight. We then let our horses graze, and the rhinos relax again. Now all we have to do is wait for them to come closer. And how close they do come! Eventually, they're standing about 5 metres away from us

A short distance away. Everyone stares at one another for a few moments – the rhinos at the horses and riders, and we look back. Suddenly, the huge animals get scared of their own boldness, snort, turn away and trot off. Our horses remain incredibly calm. I'm a fair bit more excited.

And then there are the giraffes! They really impress me too. At one point, we come across a few giraffes at the edge of the vast plain. Three giraffes are standing not far from us, as if turned to stone, looking over at us. What a magnificent sight! Their spotted coats stand out beautifully against the green plain and the mountains behind. I take about ten photos of these three giraffes. Of course, the photos all look very similar. But still – each one is more beautiful than the last.

Picture

Three giraffes on the vast plain

On the second day, we'll have to put our foot down on the way to the picnic spot where the bush brunch awaits us. After all, we'd like to drive past the hippos by the lake.

They were spotted there on the very same day, and Kirsten doesn't want to keep them from us. When we arrive at the lake, however, the large animals seem to be asleep. All you can see are two eyes and two nostrils sticking out of the water.

Otherwise, nothing is happening. We gallop round a mountain. Our picnic spot is in the next valley. There, we're welcomed with a glass of sparkling wine.

What a treat! Various meat skewers are already sizzling on the barbecue. Probably kudu and wildebeest, or something equally exotic... With our bellies full, we ride back to the lodge.

On our last evening, Fanni, one of the reserve managers, takes us on a jeep safari. He shows us the secretary bird, which kills and eats snakes of all sizes. He also takes us to see the buffaloes. They're huge. So, after the rhinos, we've now seen the second animal of the 'Big 5'. At sunset, we drive out onto the vast plain for a 'sundowner'. A wonderful African tradition – you drive to a particularly beautiful spot at sunset and have a drink together there. We drink gin and tonic and feel brilliant.

After four nights at Dinaka Lodge, it's time to say goodbye. And we're actually a bit sad. We'd love to stay a bit longer. But Botswana is waiting for us, and we're already looking forward to that...

After just under four hours' drive, we reach the border with Botswana. And what a border! It fits perfectly with our image of Africa. We cross the Limpopo River from South Africa to Botswana in a rather adventurous-looking cable car. Later, we spot crocodiles and hippos in the same river. It's just as well that, contrary to our expectations, the gondola didn't crash after all.

After passing through customs, we meet our guide for our time in Western Botswana. We climb into an open-top safari jeep. From here, it's not far to the camp. On the drive, we let the warm air brush against our faces – it must be a few degrees warmer than it was in South Africa. Ostriches, impalas and warhogs scatter as we approach. The landscape here is different from that in South Africa. The terrain is flat and looks rather barren. However, there are large trees here and there.

After crossing a dry riverbed, we reach Two Mashatu Camp. It is now clear where the camp gets its name from. Two huge Mashatu trees stand before us. One of them towers above the

The 'Lounge', a circular space with sofas beneath a Lalapalm roof, and the 'Dining Room', a large, heavy wooden table with chairs, covered by the same type of roof. As we step out of the jeep, a pretty Black woman hands us a welcome cocktail. We gratefully accept it after the long drive.

West shows us our tents. They're scattered a few metres further into the bush. They're actually quite comfortable tents. They stand on a teak platform, have a small veranda, a really big bed inside and an adjoining 'bathroom' at the back with a washbasin, a pit toilet and an open-air shower.

Tent at Two Mashatu Camp, Botswana

In the late afternoon, we go for a short ride to try out our new four-legged companions for the next few days. West makes sure he's chosen the right horse for everyone and lets us gallop away from the group one by one and back again. Everything goes well. Everyone is steady in the saddle and gets on well with their horse. That's really important when you're out riding in the bush. 'My' horse – Boggart – seems absolutely reliable. He's calm yet eager to move forward.

Back at camp, it's already starting to get dark. West accompanies us to our tent. He'll be doing that from now on. We shouldn't be wandering around the camp on our own in the dark, and certainly not outside the camp. After all, there are lions in this area. The thought does make us feel rather nervous. So, for the first few days, we peer fearfully behind every bush, shine our torches thoroughly over everything and expect at any moment to spot two gleaming eyes staring at us. In fact, we're feeling quite unsettled at first. We realise that we're quite deep in the bush.

At least I feel safe in the tent. West says that no animal attacks a tent. So, despite the many unfamiliar noises all around our tent, we manage to sleep quite well. Not for long, though. Early in the morning at five, before it's even light, West wakes us up. At least he brings us a cup of coffee straight to the tent. Still half-asleep, I squeeze into my riding breeches. This morning we're planning a long ride and aim to be back at camp before midday. After breakfast, we mount our horses. By now, it's just before sunrise. As soon as we're on our way, I realise: getting up early was well worth it. The sun rises and bathes the landscape in a soft morning light. We ride past rocks over which marmot-like creatures scurry – hyraxes. A family of warthogs is grazing in front of them. I'm slowly realising that I don't find these animals so ugly after all. They're certainly interesting. And funny – when they take off at a run with their tails held straight up.

We cover a fair distance at a long, leisurely canter until West stops and tells us there are elephants ahead. We remain completely still. Elephants are just like rhinos: they have poor eyesight but very keen hearing. We let the horses graze, and the elephants pass right by us without noticing us. It's a small family comprising a bull, a cow and

Two boys. We'll see plenty more elephants in Botswana over the next few days, but this first encounter is already something quite special. West takes a photo of me and Boggart with the elephants in the background.

Picture

Me on Boggart with the elephant in the background

Under a large Mashatu tree, we meet up with the jeep carrying Mirko and two rangers. They've brought some cold drinks with them. After a short break, we set off again.

After riding for a short while, West suddenly shouts, "Lions!" Before I've even properly taken in what he's said, I see them coming towards us – two lionesses! You don't really want to come across lions on horseback. You don't go looking for them. We just happened to ride straight into them by chance. And normally, lions lie around during the day, full and lethargic. But these two are clearly interested in us! One of the lionesses even roars. West signals for us to carry on riding calmly. He steps in front of the lions, shouts at them once loudly and cracks his whip. That clearly makes an impression. They pause and then turn away.

We wait at a safe distance. The situation was probably a bit critical after all. But as I had the feeling the whole time that West had everything under control, I stayed calm. That was important too. If we'd bolted, the lions would probably have taken us for prey and given chase. West is quite shaken by the experience. He admits to us that he's never had to use his whip on lions before. He radioed the rangers to let them know where the lions were. They called him later "whimp" – a coward, because he's so excited as he tells us about our encounter. We all think he's very brave! What an experience.

On the way back to camp, we come across lots of giraffes and a large herd of wildebeest and zebras. It seems the animals here are less wary of us and let us get closer. This is no doubt because all forms of hunting have been banned in this area for many decades. Dinaka Lodge, on the other hand, also offers hunting safaris in the summer.

Back at camp, we enjoy a shower under the open sky, lunch and a long siesta. It's hot.

Later in the afternoon, we drive back to the lions in the jeep. Now we can watch them in complete relaxation. They're just lazing about listlessly in the sand and yawning at us. Nevertheless, we're fascinated by these large, majestic cats.

Picture

The lioness has nothing but a yawn for us

Mirko had already spotted a leopard that morning. It had carried an antelope high up into a tree and was then lying beneath it, having eaten its fill. Unfortunately, we didn't manage to spot the leopard again. So we're still missing one of the Big Five. We've already seen rhinos, buffalos, elephants and lions.

We're enjoying our sundowner on a hill. What a lovely tradition!

In the evening, we sit together for a while and look back on the day's events.

Over the next two days, we go on further excursions on horseback. On one occasion, we spot some hyenas. They run towards us curiously and stop just a few metres away. One hyena has a large scar behind its ears. 'It must have got caught in a trap once,' says West. On another occasion, we ride along the Limpopo River early in the morning. White-headed eagles perch majestically high up in the trees. A little further on, we spot what we've been looking for – hippos. They snort and wiggle their ears. Otherwise, though, they remain hidden in the water. West tells us that hippos have skin that's very sensitive to light and wouldn't survive out of the water during the day. At a gallop, we startle a large herd of zebras and eland antelopes, which we drive along ahead of us for a while. Giraffes and elephants keep appearing.

But it's not just the large animals. There are also lots of interesting little sights to discover. 'Justice', a Mashatu ranger, shows us 'army ants' – killer ants that hunt termites – during a jeep safari.

Later – after the obligatory sundowner – we drive through the bush in the dark. Time and again, eyes sparkle in the beam of the large torch. The many eyes of a large herd of impalas twinkle like 'city lights', says Justice. He's right. We're spellbound.

On our last evening, we set off on a jeep trip to a nearby hill where a very old 'baobab' tree stands. Even from a distance, you can see the solitary tree high up on the rocks. After a short climb, we reach the centuries-old relic. A former colonial ruler has carved his initials into it. The tree has an incredibly thick trunk and its bark feels as though it has turned to stone. It looks strange, but exerts a powerful fascination over us. From the hill, you can see far across the countryside.

Up here, we're enjoying our sundowner. It's almost a full moon. But before it gets completely dark, we have to start thinking about the descent. We can hardly tear ourselves away.

On our final morning, we go for just a short ride. West guides us along a bush trail. A few fallen tree trunks make perfect natural obstacles. Our horses clear the small jumps with ease.

Then it's time to say goodbye. To the horses, the two Mashatu trees, and to West. He drives us back to the border along sandy tracks. We cross the river by cable car. A few hours' drive later, we're back at Johannesburg Airport. Civilisation has us back. At the airport, we sit together and talk about what we've experienced. It already feels like a dream. Back in Germany, that feeling grows stronger. It all seems very unreal. If it weren't for the many photos we've taken. It must be because Africa is so different – a different world. Deep down, of course, we know – we really were there! We experienced it. Something truly special.

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